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ROBERT MORRIS

THE FINANCIER OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

BY CHARLES HENRY HART

ROBERT MORRIS

THE FINANCIER OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

A SKETCH

BY

CHARLES HENRY HART

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Sketch of Abraham Lincoln;" "Discourse on Gullán C.
Verplanck;" "Memoir of George Ticknor;"
"Bibliographia Lincolniana;" "Life
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etc. etc. etc.

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NOTA BENE.

I HAVE in course of preparation, and hope soon to publish in two volumes royal octavo, a "Life of Robert Morris, with a History of the Finances of the American Revolution," for which work I have a large mass of highly interesting and important material hitherto unpublished. At the same time, I know that there are in the portfolios of autograph collectors and others, many valuable *documents* pertaining to the subject of my work, including *LETTERS written to and by* Robert Morris, during the Revolution and the decade following its close. Persons having documents of this kind will greatly oblige me by communicating the fact, or by furnishing me with copies of the same.

CHARLES HENRY HART.

PHILADELPHIA, November, 1877.

No. 204, South Fifth Street.

NOTE.

The following Monograph was presented, at the Centennial Celebration of the Adoption of the "Resolutions Respecting Independency," in Independence Hall, Philadelphia, July 1st, 1876.

Robert Morris.

ROBERT MORRIS.

PRESENTED BY MRS. ARMINE NIXON HART.

(Centennial Collection.)

In presenting a brief memoir of the life of Robert Morris, it is impossible to forget the biting sarcasm and sharp wit of Rufus Choate's memorable toast,—“ Pennsylvania's two most distinguished citizens, Robert Morris, a native of Great Britain, and Benjamin Franklin, a native of Massachusetts.” It is to portray the life of one of these “*citizens*” that I have been invited here to-day.

Robert Morris, the Financier of the American Revolution, was born in Liverpool, Kingdom of Great Britain, on the 20th of January, 1733–34, old style, or what would be, according to the modern method of computation, January 31st, 1734. His father, also Robert Morris, came to this country and settled at Oxford on the eastern shore of Maryland prior to the year 1740. He was there engaged in the tobacco trade as the factor of Foster Cunliffe, Esq., of England. His tombstone in Whitemarsh burial ground, Talbot County, Maryland, records, that “ A salute from the cannon of a ship, the wad fracturing his arm, was the signal by which he departed greatly lamented, as he was esteemed, in the fortieth year of his age, on the 12th day of July, MDCCL.”

Robert, the son, at an early age came to Philadelphia, and entered the counting-house of Mr. Charles Willing, one of the first merchants of his day, and subsequently in 1754, at the age of twenty, formed a copartnership with his son Thomas Willing, which lasted until 1793, a period of thirty-nine years, and the firm of Willing & Morris became the best known and largest importing house in the colonies. In October, 1765, upon the arrival of the “*Royal Charlotte*,” carrying the obnoxious stamped paper for the colonies, a town meeting was held at the State House, to prevent the landing of the stamps,

Robert Morris.

and a committee was appointed to wait upon John Hughes, the stamp distributor, and demand his resignation of the office. On this committee Mr. Morris was appointed, and from Hughes' letters¹ it would appear that he and James Tilghman were the spokesmen on the occasion. Later in the same year Mr. Morris signed the Non-Importation Resolutions and Agreement of the Merchants of Philadelphia, and in January, 1766, was appointed one of the first wardens of the port of Philadelphia, by the Assembly of Pennsylvania. Upon the formation of a Committee of Safety for the Province, in June, 1775, Mr. Morris was made vice-president, Franklin being the head, and continued in the office until the dissolution of the Committee, in July, 1776.

The appointment of Mr. Morris, by the Assembly of Pennsylvania on the 3d of November, 1775, as one of the delegates to the second congress, then in session at Philadelphia since May 10th, was his first entrance into important public life. Soon after he had taken his seat he was added to and made chairman of the Secret Committee, which had been selected in September, to contract for the importation of arms and ammunition. On the 11th of December, he was designated as one of the committee to devise ways and means for furnishing the colonies with a naval armament, and subsequently, on the formation of a naval committee, he was made a member. In April, 1776, Mr. Morris was specially commissioned to negotiate bills of exchange, and to take other measures to procure money for the Congress. When Richard Henry Lee's resolution of June 7th came up for final action on July 2d, the day we celebrate, he, with John Dickinson, Thomas Willing, and Charles Humphreys, voted against independence; and afterwards, on the fourth, when the Declaration was submitted for approval, he and Dickinson absented themselves from their seats in Congress. His action was of course much commented upon, and John Adams, the most ardent and at the same time the most severe and censorious of his contemporaries, wrote to General Gates: "You ask me what you are to think of Robert

¹ 2 Hazard's Register, 247.

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Morris? I will tell you what I think of him. I think he has a masterly understanding, an open temper, and an honest heart; and if he does not always vote for what you and I think proper, it is because he thinks that a large body of people remains who are not yet of his mind." This query was doubtless occasioned by the apparent inconsistency of Mr. Morris's action with his views expressed to General Gates, in a letter written from Philadelphia on April 6th, 1776, in which he says:—

"Where the plague are these Commissioners? If they are to come, what is it that detains them? It is time we should be on a certainty, and know positively whether the liberties of *America* can be established and secured by reconciliation, or whether we must totally renounce connection with Great *Britain*, and fight our way to a total independence. Whilst we continue thus firmly united amongst ourselves, there is no doubt but either of these points may be carried; but it seems to me we shall quarrel about which of these roads is best to pursue, unless the Commissioners appear soon and lead us into the first path, therefore I wish them to come, dreading nothing so much as even an appearance of division amongst ourselves." Mr. Morris's reason for this course was that he considered the act premature and unnecessary, that the colonies were not yet ready for independence; and that his motives were respected and sanctioned by his constituents, and his patriotism never questioned, are shown by the fact that on the 20th of the same month, he, alone of the members who had voted with him, was re-elected a delegate. On this same day he wrote "From the Hills on Schuylkill" to Joseph Reed: "I have uniformly voted against and opposed the Declaration of Independence, because, in my poor opinion, it was an improper time, and will neither promote the interest nor redound to the honour of *America*; for it has caused division when we wanted union, and will be ascribed to very different principles than those which ought to give rise to such an important measure. I did expect my conduct on this great question would have procured my dismission from the great Council, but find myself disappointed,

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for the Convention has thought proper to return me in the new delegation, and although my interest and inclination prompt me to decline the service, yet I cannot depart from one point which first induced me to enter the public line. I mean an opinion that it is the duty of every individual to act his part in whatever station his country may call him to, in hours of difficulty, danger, and distress. Whilst I think this a duty, I must submit, although the councils of America have taken a different course from my judgment and wishes. I think that the individual who declines the service of his country because its councils are not conformable to his ideas, makes but a bad subject; a good one will follow if he cannot lead." Subsequently, on the 2d of August, when the engrossed Declaration was laid on the table to be signed, he subscribed, with firm hand and unfaltering heart, his signature to our Magna Charta. This act was not inconsistent with his earlier course, for in that brief month great changes had taken place.

He cannot, however, be said to have been, like Sam. Adams, "BURNING FOR INDEPENDENCE," for while he was ever earnest in his exertions to withstand the encroachments of the British crown, he afterwards, on several occasions, expressed his great regret for the act. In October, 1777, after the surrender of Burgoyne, he wrote to Gates:—

"Mr. Johnson, and, indeed, all the other Maryland delegates, are at home forming a Constitution. This seems to be the present business of all America, except the army. It is the fruit of a certain premature declaration which, you know, I always opposed. My opposition was founded on the evil consequences I foresaw, or thought I foresaw, and the present state of several of the colonies justifies my apprehension. We are disputing about liberties, privileges, posts, and places, at the very time we ought to have nothing in view but the securing of those objects, and placing them on such a footing, as to make them worth contending for amongst ourselves hereafter. But instead of that, the vigor of this and several other States is lost in intestine divisions; and unless this spirit of contention is checked by some other means, I fear it

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will have a baneful influence on the measures of America. Nothing do I wish for more, than a peace on terms honorable and beneficial to both countries; and I am convinced it is more consistent with the interest of Great Britain to acknowledge our independence, and enter into commercial treaties with us, than to persist in attempting to reduce us to unconditional submission. I hope we shall never be reduced to such a vile situation, whilst a true friend of America and freedom exists. Life would not be worth having, and it is better to perish by the sword, than to drag out our remaining days in misery and scorn; but I hope Heaven has better things in store for the votaries of such a cause."

In December, 1776, when Congress retired to Baltimore on the approach of Cornwallis, a committee, consisting of Mr. Morris, George Clymer, and George Walton, was appointed to remain in Philadelphia, with extensive power to execute all necessary public business. It was just at this period that Washington wrote to Morris, from above Trenton, that unless he had a certain amount of specie at once, he would be unable to keep the army together, and could not foretell the result. Morris on his personal credit borrowed a sufficient sum, forwarded it to Washington, and enabled him to finish the victory over the Hessians at Trenton, by his success at Princeton.

On the 10th of March, 1777, Mr. Morris was a third time sent as a delegate to Congress, and soon after was placed on the Committee of Commerce, which succeeded the Secret Committee. When Hancock, in the fall of this year, on account of his ill-health, decided to resign his place in Congress, Mr. Morris was urged to accept the Presidentship, but he declined to serve, as it would interfere entirely with his private business, and disarrange his public engagements. Henry Laurens was therefore chosen as Hancock's successor. In November, Mr. Morris was selected with Elbridge Gerry to repair to the army, and confer confidentially with the Commander-in-chief, as to the best means of providing for the Army. On the 13th of December, he was again re-elected to Congress, and on the 9th day of July, 1778, led the Pennsylvania delegation, in signing the "Articles of Confederation

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and Perpetual Union between the States," under which the government was carried on until supplanted, ten years later, by the Constitution of the United States. In August, he was appointed a member of the Committee of Finance, and in the spring of 1780, organized the Bank of Pennsylvania, "to supply the army with provisions for two months," and to it subscribed £10,000. Early in the year 1781, Congress found it necessary to organize the Executive departments of the government, and, "whatever may have been thought, in regard to the candidates suitable for the other departments, there was but one opinion in Congress and in the nation as to the proper person for taking charge of the finances, then in a dilapidated and most deplorable condition. The public sentiment everywhere pointed to Robert Morris, whose great experience and success as a merchant, his ardor in the cause of American liberty, his firmness of character, fertility of mental resources, and profound knowledge of pecuniary operations qualified him in a degree far beyond any other person for this arduous and responsible station."¹ Accordingly, on the 20th of February, at a time when Mr. Morris was a member of the Assembly of Pennsylvania, he was unanimously chosen to the office of Superintendent of Finance. This action was communicated to him, by the President of Congress, in the following letter:—

"PHILADELPHIA, February 21, 1781.

"SIR—By the enclosed copy you will be informed that Congress have been pleased unanimously to elect you, Sir, to the important office of Superintendent of Finance.

It is hoped that this important call of your Country will be received by you, Sir, as irresistible.

I have the honor to be, with sentiments of esteem and regard,

Your most obedient and very humble servant,

SAM. HUNTINGTON, *Presdt.*

ROBERT MORRIS, *Esquire.*"

On the 13th of March, Mr. Morris sent his reply to Congress, in which he made certain stipulations as a condition

¹ Jared Sparks' "Life of Gouverneur Morris," vol. i. p. 231.

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precedent upon his accepting the office. This led to a conference with a committee of the Congress specially appointed for the purpose, which resulted in the passage of certain resolutions on the 20th of March and 21st and 27th of April, in effect assenting to Mr. Morris's conditions; and, upon receiving, from the President of Congress, copies of these resolutions, Mr. Morris, on May 14th, accepted the office of Superintendent of Finance. In his letter of acceptance, which is a noble eulogium upon the man who wrote it, he says: "In accepting the office bestowed on me, I sacrifice much of my interest, my ease, my domestic enjoyments, and internal tranquillity. If I know my own heart, I make these sacrifices with a disinterested view to the service of my country. I am ready to go further; and THE UNITED STATES MAY COMMAND EVERYTHING I HAVE EXCEPT MY INTEGRITY, AND THE LOSS OF THAT WOULD EFFECTUALLY DISABLE ME FROM SERVING THEM MORE." From this period until November 1st, 1784, when he resigned, he continued to fill this arduous and responsible post.

In so brief a notice it is impossible to recount the duties which this appointment imposed; but it was a herculean task, which he managed so as to bring order out of chaos and success out of doubt. When the exhausted credit of the government threatened the most alarming consequences; when the army was utterly destitute of the necessary supplies of food, clothing, arms, and ammunition; when Washington almost began to fear for the result, Robert Morris, upon his own credit and from his private resources, furnished those pecuniary means without which all the physical force of the country would have been in vain; without Robert Morris the sword of Washington would have rusted in its sheath. A dispassionate foreigner, Carlo Botta, in his History of the American Revolution, says: "Certainly the Americans owed and still owe as much acknowledgment to the financial operations of Robert Morris as to the negotiations of Benjamin Franklin or even the arms of George Washington."

One of the earliest official acts of Mr. Morris was to submit to Congress, in the same month as he accepted his appointment, "A Plan for Establishing a National Bank for the United

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States," and, on the 31st of the following December, "The President, Directors, and Corporation of the Bank of North America" were incorporated. This was the first incorporated bank in the United States. The Assembly of Pennsylvania having in 1785 annulled the charter of the bank, Mr. Morris, at the earnest solicitation of many citizens, consented to become a candidate for the Legislature, in conjunction with his friends Thomas Fitzsimmons and George Clymer, in order to obtain, if practicable, its renewal. He was consequently elected the following year, and although failing in the first effort, his exertions were subsequently crowned with success.

When peace had once again fallen upon the land of his adoption, and a fundamental law was necessary to be formed for its governance, Mr. Morris was chosen a delegate to the memorable convention which met in Philadelphia, May 25th, 1787, and framed the Constitution of the United States. It was he who proposed Washington for president of that convention, and during its entire session Washington was his guest. During the deliberations of the convention he strenuously advocated the choice of senators *for life*, and that they should be "men of great and established property—an aristocracy." In the course of one of his speeches, he used these weighty words, which deserve to be studied carefully at the present day, with a healthy recollection of our present condition: "History proves, I admit, that men of large property will uniformly endeavor to establish tyranny. How shall we ward off these evils? Give them the second branch, the Senate, and you secure their weight for the public good. They are responsible for their conduct, and this lust of power will ever be checked by the democratic branch, and thus form the stability of your government. But if we continue changing our measures by the breath of democracy, who will confide in our engagements? Who will trust us? Ask any person whether he has any confidence in the government of Congress under the Confederation or that of the State of Pennsylvania, he will readily answer you 'No.' Ask him the reason, and he will tell you it is because he has no confidence in their stability." In October, 1788, he received a renewed mark of

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the high confidence his fellow-citizens entertained for him, by being chosen the first Senator from Pennsylvania, to the first Congress of the United States under the Constitution, and which assembled in New York on the 4th of March, 1789. It was mainly through his instrumentality that the seat of government was removed, the next year, to Philadelphia, where it remained, *temporarily*, for ten years, until the buildings were completed in the District of Columbia. He served a full term in the Senate, retiring in 1795. Washington desired Mr. Morris to become his Secretary of the Treasury, and upon his declining requested him to name the person most competent, in his opinion, to fill the office, which he did by naming Alexander Hamilton.

On Mr. Morris's retirement from public life, he began to speculate largely in unimproved lands in all sections of the country, and in February, 1795, organized, with John Nicholson and James Greenleaf, the North American Land Company, which, through the dishonesty and rascality of Greenleaf, finally caused his ruin, and burdened the closing years of his life with utter poverty. The government, that he had carried on his own shoulders through adversity to prosperity, allowed him to remain from the 16th of February, 1798, until the 26th of August, 1801, a period of *three years, six months, and ten days*, an inmate of a debtor's prison, without raising a hand to help him, thus adding another link to the chain which proves that "Republics are ungrateful."

Mr. Morris survived his imprisonment not quite five years, dying on the 7th of May, 1806, in his seventy-third year, and his remains repose in the family vault, Christ Church, Second Street above Market Street, Philadelphia. Mr. Morris was married March 2d, 1769, to Mary, daughter of Thomas and Esther [Huelings] White, and sister of Bishop White. They had seven children: Robert, who married Ann Shoemaker; Thomas, who married Sarah Kane; William White; Hetty, who married James Marshall, of Virginia; Charles; Maria, who married Henry Nixon; and Henry, who married Eliza Jane Smith.

Mr. Morris was a very large man, quite six feet in stature,

Robert Morris.

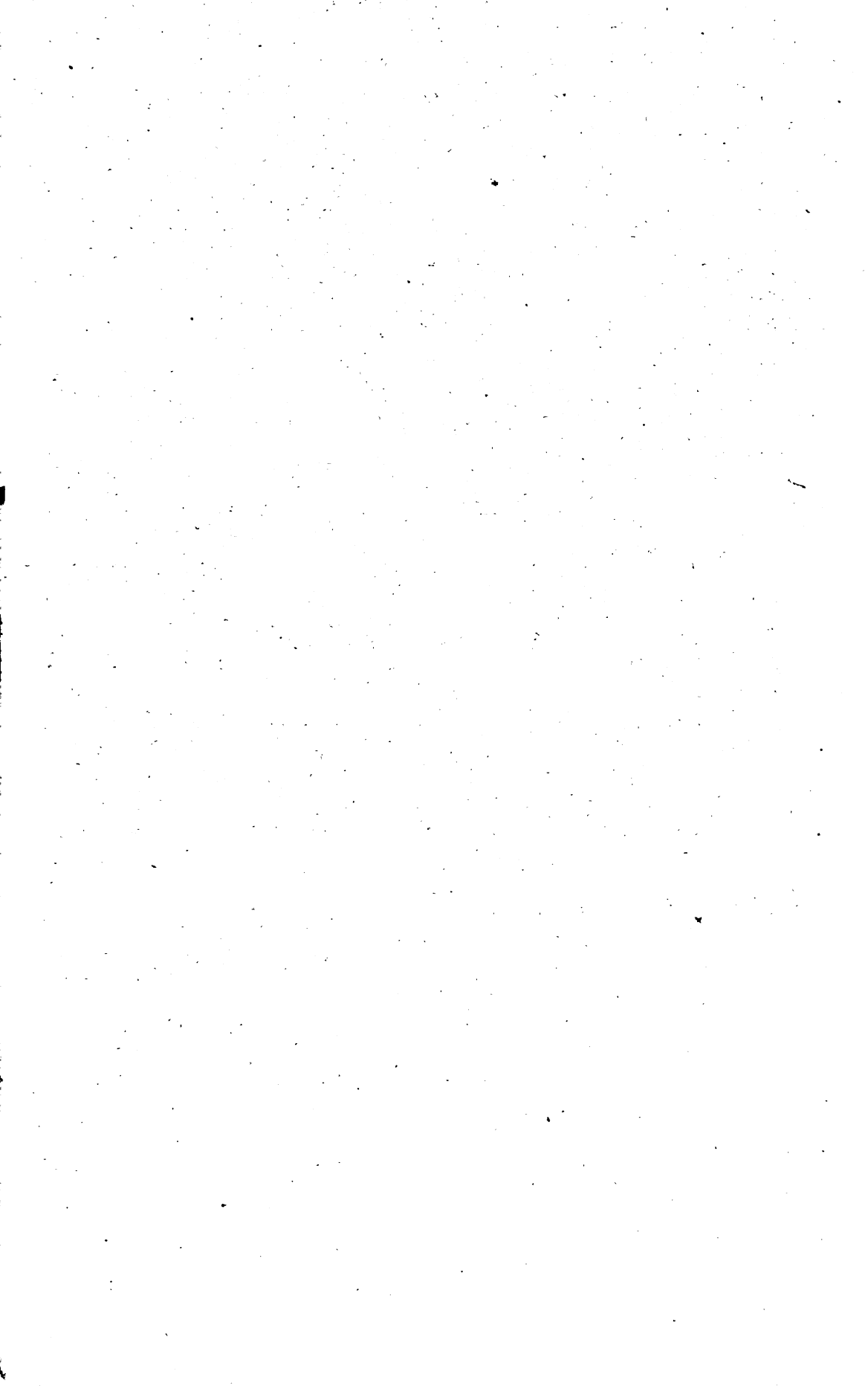
with a full, well-formed vigorous frame, and clear, smooth, florid complexion. His hair, sandy in youth, was worn when gray, loose and unpowdered. His eyes were bright blue, of medium size, but uncommonly brilliant. There are four portraits of him. The earliest by Charles Wilson Peale, now in Independence Hall, was never like the original, and Mrs. Morris could not bear it in her sight, or to hear it mentioned as a likeness of Mr. Morris. The second, a miniature by Trumbull, is now in Virginia, in possession of his granddaughter, Mrs. Ambler. The third was painted by Robert Edge Pine, the English artist, for whom Mr. Morris built a house in Eighth Street below Market, and is the most familiar one, as from it all the engraved portraits have been taken. It is believed to have been a very fair likeness, and is now in possession of the family of his son Henry Morris. The latest portrait was painted by the great genius Gilbert Stuart, and is a masterpiece of this great artist's work. As you look upon the canvas you forget it is inanimate, and feel as if you were in the very presence of the man, while that intuitive something tells you it is like as life. The original is in New York, in possession of the family of his son Thomas Morris, and a duplicate is in possession of his granddaughter Miss Nixon, of Philadelphia.

Mr. Morris possessed naturally great intellectual qualities. His mind was acute, penetrating, and logical. His conversation was cheerful, affable, and engaging. His public speaking was fluent, forcible, and impressive, and he was listened to always with the profound attention and respect his great experience and practical good sense so justly merited. In debate, his argumentative eloquence is described as being of a high order, expressing himself in a terse and correct manner. His extensive public and private correspondence was conducted in a graceful, clear style. His manners were gracious and simple, and free from the formality which generally prevailed, while at heart he was an aristocrat, and looked upon as the leader of the aristocratic party in the republic. He was noted for his great cheerfulness and urbanity of disposition, which even under the most distressing circumstances never for-

sook him, and from the prison house in adversity as from the counting-house in prosperity, he sent familiar notes filled with amusing and sprightly expressions; but his sarcasm and invective were as sharp and severe as his benevolence and kindness were unbounded. In all his misfortunes he seldom uttered a complaint, placing them where they justly belonged—to his ambition for accumulating wealth. None of the many worthies of the Revolution stood higher in the esteem or approached nearer to the heart of Washington than Robert Morris. The *pater patriæ's* adopted son, George Washington Parke Custis, says, "If I am asked—'And did not Washington unbend and admit to familiarity and social friendship some one person to whom age and long and interesting associations gave peculiar privilege, the privilege of the heart?'—I answer that favored individual was Robert Morris." In the fall of 1798, when Washington repaired to Philadelphia to superintend the organization of his last army, called together on the apprehension of war with France, "he paid his first visit to the prison house of Robert Morris. The old man wrung the hand of the Chief in silence, while his tearful eye gave the welcome to such a home." Well may we repeat Whittier's words:—

"What has the gray haired prisoner done?
Has murder stained his hands with gore?
Not so; his crime 's a fouler one:
God made the old man poor."

C. H. H.



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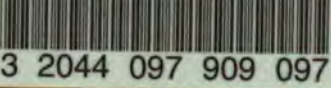
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